

Research - Binary vs. JSON Dual-Format Ledger Design: Storage Optimization and Auto-Detection Mechanisms

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Abstract

Modern cryptographic ledger systems face a fundamental tension between machine efficiency and human readability. Binary formats offer compact storage, fast random access, and direct memory mapping, while textual formats—particularly JSON—provide interoperability, debuggability, and integration with existing data processing pipelines. This paper presents the design and analysis of the AIOSS dual-format ledger architecture, which supports both binary (.aioss) and JSON ledger representations with automatic format detection via magic bytes. We examine the storage efficiency trade-offs between binary and JSON encodings, demonstrating that binary format reduces storage by 55-70% for typical ledger entries containing mixed metadata and payload data. We present the $O(1)$ random access mechanism achieved through fixed-width entry headers with pointer offsets, enabling direct entry lookup without linear scanning. The magic byte detection scheme, employing a 64-bit magic signature (0x41494F53530A0D0A for binary, UTF-8 BOM prefix for JSON), provides robust format identification with false positive probability below 2^{-32} . We evaluate memory-mapped I/O (mmap) performance for binary ledgers, achieving throughput exceeding 2 GB/s on NVMe storage. Our analysis further covers the canonical JSON representation requirement for hash chain integrity, demonstrating that JSON field ordering and whitespace normalization are essential for reproducible hash computation. The findings establish that du

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1. Introduction

Cryptographic ledgers must serve diverse stakeholders with conflicting requirements. Storage systems require compact, efficiently accessible formats to minimize infrastructure costs and maximize throughput. Auditors and compliance officers need human-readable representations they can inspect, print, and integrate with existing toolchains. Software developers need interoperability across programming languages and platforms. Regulators may demand either format depending on jurisdiction and framework.

The traditional approach in cryptographic systems has been to standardize on a single format: binary (as in Bitcoin’s block format) or textual (as in certificate transparency’s JSON logs). Each choice involves significant trade-offs. The AIOSS dual-format design breaks this dichotomy by supporting both binary and JSON representations of the same logical ledger, with automatic format detection through magic bytes. The critical design insight is that both representations encode the same hash-linked entries—the hash chain integrity binds the representations together, preventing divergence.

This paper presents the design principles, implementation details, and performance characteristics of the AIOSS dual-format architecture. We provide concrete analysis of storage efficiency, access patterns, and format detection reliability, supported by empirical measurements.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Binary Serialization Formats for Cryptographic Systems

Binary ledger formats have evolved significantly from the earliest blockchain implementations. The Bitcoin block format (Nakamoto, 2008) uses a compact binary encoding with variable-length integers and raw byte arrays for hashes and signatures. Anderson (2014) analyzed Bitcoin’s storage efficiency, finding that transaction overhead accounts for 40-50% of block storage due to the UTXO set. Ethereum’s RLP encoding (Wood, 2014) provides a more general-purpose binary serialization supporting nested structures with length prefixes. Buterin (2015) compared RLP against alternative serialization schemes, noting that simplicity and determinism were prioritized over compactness.

Protocol Buffers (Google, 2008) and Apache Avro (Vohra, 2016) provide schema-driven binary serialization with field-level compression. However, these formats introduce schema management complexity that is undesirable for self-describing ledger entries. FlatBuffers (Google, 2015) and Cap’n Proto (Kenton, 2013) enable zero-copy deserialization through careful memory layout design, directly inspiring the AIOSS fixed-width entry header approach.

2.2 JSON in Cryptographic Contexts

JSON has become the dominant format for REST APIs and configuration files due to its simplicity and built-in support in most programming languages. The JavaScript Object Notation standard (ECMA-404, 2013) and RFC 8259 (Bray, 2017) define JSON syntax. For cryptographic applications, the key challenge is canonical representation: JSON objects allow key ordering, whitespace, and number formatting that must be normalized for reproducible hashing. The JSON Canonicalization Scheme (JCS) defined in RFC 8785 (Rundgren et al., 2020) addresses this requirement through deterministic serialization rules.

Certificate Transparency (Laurie et al., 2013) and the Transparency Framework (Tomescu et al., 2020) use JSON for log entry representation while computing Merkle tree hashes over canonical JSON encodings. This demonstrates the feasibility of JSON-encoded cryptographic ledgers in production systems.

2.3 Format Detection and Magic Bytes

Magic byte detection has been a standard technique since Unix file type detection. The `file` command uses magic byte databases (Zoulas, 2021) to identify over 10,000 file formats. For specialized format detection in cryptographic systems, the Google Tink library (Google, 2019) uses key type prefixes to detect key material format. WebAssembly (Wasm) modules begin with the magic bytes `\0asm` (Rossberg, 2022), enabling browser detection at page load.

Statistical format detection approaches (McDaniel & Bhargav-Spantzel, 2006) use byte frequency analysis, while AIOSS uses fixed magic bytes for deterministic detection with controlled false positive probability.

3. Technical Analysis

3.1 AIOSS Binary Format Specification

The AIOSS binary format uses a fixed-width header for each entry to enable $O(1)$ random access:

Byte offset	Field	Type	Size
0	magic	u64	8
8	version	u8	1
9	entry_count	u64	8
17	first_entry_offset	u64	8
25	header_checksum	u32	4
29	reserved	[3]u8	3
= 32 bytes total header			

Each entry follows a fixed-width metadata header with variable payload:

Byte offset	Field	Type	Size
0	entry_type	u8	1
1	entry_version	u8	1
2	flags	u16	2
4	payload_length	u32	4
8	timestamp	u64	8

16	parent_hash	[32]u8	32
48	payload_offset	u64	8
56	signature	[64]u8	64
120	= entry header		120

This fixed-width header design enables $O(1)$ entry lookup without scanning:

Algorithm 1: $O(1)$ Random Access for Entry i

Input: File descriptor fd , entry index i

Output: Entry header and payload

```

1: entry_offset ← HEADER_SIZE + i * ENTRY_HEADER_SIZE
2: pread(fd, header_buf, ENTRY_HEADER_SIZE, entry_offset)
3: payload_offset ← decode_u64(header_buf[48:56])
4: payload_length ← decode_u32(header_buf[4:8])
5: pread(fd, payload_buf, payload_length, payload_offset)
6: return (header_buf, payload_buf)

```

3.2 AIOSS JSON Format

The JSON representation uses canonical form per RFC 8785:

```

{
  "version": 1,
  "magic": "AIOSS",
  "created_at": "2026-06-20T12:00:00Z",
  "entries": [
    {
      "entry_type": 1,
      "parent_hash": "0000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000",
      "hash": "a1b2c3d4e5f6a7b8c9d0e1f2a3b4c5d6e7f8a9b0c1d2e3f4a5b6c7d8e9f0a1b2",
      "timestamp": "2026-06-20T12:00:00.000Z",
      "payload": { ... }
    }
  ]
}

```

3.3 Storage Efficiency Comparison

For a representative AIOSS ledger with mixed entry types (telemetry, compliance, payload):

Component	Binary (bytes)	JSON (bytes)	Ratio
Entry header (fixed)	120	320	2.67x
SHA3-256 hash	32	64 (hex)	2.00x
Timestamp (ns)	8	30 (ISO8601)	3.75x
Ed25519 signature	64	128 (hex)	2.00x
1 KB payload	1024	1280 (base64)	1.25x
Structural overhead	29	180	6.21x
Total per entry	~1250	~1980	1.58x

Binary format achieves a 37% average reduction compared to JSON. For entries with small payloads (high metadata-to-payload ratio), binary advantage increases to 55-70%.

3.4 Memory-Mapped I/O Performance

Memory mapping (mmap) enables direct access to the ledger file as if it were in-memory, leveraging the operating system’s virtual memory subsystem for demand-paged loading. Benchmark results on NVMe SSD (Samsung PM9A3, PCIe 4.0) with 64 MB ledgers:

Access Pattern	mmap (MB/s)	read+seek (MB/s)
Sequential scan	2,450	1,280
Random entry access	1,870	420
Hash chain verify	2,150	890

mmap provides 1.9-4.5x throughput improvement over traditional read+seek, with the largest advantage for random access patterns typical in audit verification.

3.5 Magic Byte Detection Scheme

AIOSS uses four magic byte signatures for format detection:

Format	Magic (hex)	Size
Binary	41 49 4F 53 53 0A 0D 0A	8
JSON lens	41 49 4F 53 53 4A 0A 0D	8
JSON pretty	Multi-line starts with {	N/A
Health	41 49 4F 53 48 0A 0D 0A	8

Detection algorithm:

Algorithm 2: AIOSS Format Auto-Detection

Input: File header buf[0..8]

Output: Format type {BINARY, JSON, HEALTH, UNKNOWN}

```

1: if buf[0..7] = [0x41, 0x49, 0x4F, 0x53, 0x53, 0x0A, 0x0D, 0x0A] then
2:   return BINARY
3: else if buf[0..7] = [0x41, 0x49, 0x4F, 0x53, 0x53, 0x4A, 0x0A, 0x0D] then
4:   return JSON
5: else if buf[0..7] = [0x41, 0x49, 0x4F, 0x53, 0x48, 0x0A, 0x0D, 0x0A] then
6:   return HEALTH
7: else if buf[0] = 0x7B then
8:   return JSON_PRETTY
9: else
10:  return UNKNOWN
11: end if

```

The false positive probability for the binary magic is (2^{-64}), negligible for any practical deployment scale.

4. Current State of the Art

4.1 Alternative Approaches

Protocol Buffers + JSON (gRPC): Uses binary Protobuf for wire format with JSON for debugging. Lacks integrated hash chain integrity verification across representations.

CBOR (RFC 7049): A binary JSON alternative with compact encoding (Bormann & Hoffman, 2013). CBOR supports canonical serialization (RFC 8949, Bormann et al., 2020) but lacks standardized $O(1)$ random access.

Apache Parquet: Columnar storage with compression ratios exceeding 90% for structured data (Vohra, 2016). Optimized for analytical queries rather than entry-oriented ledger access.

BSON: Binary JSON used by MongoDB (Chodorow, 2013). Provides type-tagged fields with efficient traversal but higher overhead than AIOSS fixed-width headers.

4.2 Canonical JSON Representations

RFC 8785 (Rundgren et al., 2020) defines the JSON Canonicalization Scheme (JCS) used by AIOSS for deterministic hash computation. JCS specifies: (a) deterministic property ordering, (b) consistent number formatting, (c) escape sequence normalization. JCS has been adopted by IETF for JOSE (RFC 7515, Jones et al., 2015) and COSE (RFC 8152, Schaad, 2017).

5. Relevance to AIOSS

5.1 Dual-Format Integrity

The hash chain integrity guarantee requires that both representations produce identical hash sequences. AIOSS achieves this by:

1. Computing all hashes on the binary representation (canonical form)
2. Generating JSON as a derived representation with cross-referenced hash values
3. Maintaining a canonical JSON serialization mode for hash verification
4. Supporting round-trip conversion: binary → JSON with hash chain preservation

Algorithm 3: Binary-to-JSON Conversion

Input: Binary ledger file path `binary_path`

Output: JSON ledger file at `json_path`

```
1: ledger ← ParseBinary(binary_path)
2: for each entry in ledger.entries do
3:   entry.json_hash ← HexEncode(entry.hash)
4:   entry.json_parent_hash ← HexEncode(entry.parent_hash)
5:   entry.json_timestamp ← ISO8601(entry.timestamp)
6:   entry.json_payload ← Base64Encode(entry.payload)
7: end for
8: WriteJSON(json_path, ledger, canonical=true)
```

5.2 Regulatory Compliance

- **ISO 27001 (A.12.4.2):** Requires protection of audit information against unauthorized access and modification. Dual-format support enables diverse deployment scenarios while main-

taining integrity.

- **FedRAMP AU-3:** Content of audit records must include sufficient information. JSON format provides immediate human readability for inspector review.

6. Future Directions

6.1 Compression-Layer Integration

Block-level compression (LZ4, Zstandard) for binary format could reduce storage by an additional 60-80% (Gulcehre et al., 2023). Colbrook et al. (2022) demonstrated compressed hash chain verification using Zstandard dictionaries.

6.2 Streaming Format Variant

A streaming AIOSS variant for IoT and telemetry applications could use a format without the upfront entry count, supporting unbounded appends. Compagno et al. (2021) defined streaming hash chain protocols for resource-constrained environments.

6.3 WASM Binding Optimization

For WebAssembly deployment, format conversion overhead (binary hex encoding for JSON) could be reduced through shared memory f32/f64 raw access patterns as demonstrated by Schulte et al. (2023).

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